

Information Item

Educational Policy and Programs Committee

Academic Program Review

In this information item, staff provides a brief overview of the Commission's current activities in academic program planning and review. That work includes the analysis of all proposals submitted by the University of California, the California State University, and the California Community Colleges for new academic programs and the review of the academic master plans for new campuses. Included in this report are:

- ♦ A description of the enabling legislation that charges the Commission with a number of responsibilities regarding academic planning;
- ♦ A brief historical context for this work;
- ♦ An explanation of the Commission's role and that of the higher education segments in this process; and
- ♦ An introduction to the criteria used to evaluate new public postsecondary education programs.

The item is preparatory to the Commission staff reestablishing a series of regular reports about this on-going function regarding its oversight of academic programs in California's public colleges and universities.

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An Introduction to Academic Program Planning, Review, and Evaluation

Introduction Academic program planning, review, and evaluation encompasses a number of discrete yet aligned activities that can be visualized on a continuum beginning with academic master planning for new campuses; the projecting, proposing, and approving of new programs for existing campuses; and reviewing established programs to determine either the resources needed to maintain their continuing vitality or the process needed for their discontinuation. These elements should be seen as integral parts of a cyclical process (Barak, 1990).

Academic planning, review, and evaluation serves as a tool in long-range planning and budgeting, as a strategy to further the State's economic development, and as an instrument of societal, institutional, departmental, and personal intellectual renewal. Until June 1991, Commission staff prepared an annual report on its activities in academic planning, review, and evaluation. This brief overview reintroduces the topic, preparatory to reestablishing a series of regular reports about this on-going aspect of the Commission's work.

The context The curriculum is the life's blood of a campus, for it is the ebb and flow of its programs that largely defines an institution and shapes its form and character. It is the curriculum that prepares students for work or further study; develops a well-informed citizenry; and contributes to the well-furnished mind. Planning for new programs, maintaining the vitality of existing programs, and reviewing and evaluating their on-going worth is thus as important as any policy-making or administrative function on campus.

It is academic program planning, review, and evaluation, done informally or formally, by those both internal and external to the institution, that can help maintain the delicate balance between innovation and tradition, faculty interests and society's needs, campus priorities and State accountability, protecting institutional autonomy while ensuring the public's trust. Eugene Craven calls it "an integral part of higher education throughout its history ..., intrinsic to the process of determining what knowledge is of most worth and how it is to be organized, developed, and communicated" (1980, p. xii). Robert Barak, the most prolific writer on the subject, notes that educational evaluation can be traced to antiquity and tracks its history in American higher education through five major

stages: (1) the concept of a “program”; (2) the emergence of the accreditation movement; (3) the emergence of the profession of educational evaluation; (4) the rise of the accountability movement; and (5) the development of sophisticated approaches to the management of higher education (1986).

Unlike many topics in higher education, academic program planning, review, and evaluation does not have a permanent organized constituency. Both within and outside the academy, there is a lack of clarity as to its purposes. Most departments and most faculty fail to see its relevance to the work they do each day (Wergin, 1999). Little has been written about it in the literature. Headlines in educational weeklies or the popular press do not reverberate with exhortations to increase it or decrease it. There are no organizations devoted exclusively to its study. When a session on academic programs is to be found in a conference program, it is matter of some surprise. While academic program planning, review, and evaluation is an important function in higher education, it may also be one of its best-kept secrets.

Nonetheless, all institutions and most state higher education agencies are involved in some way with academic program approval and review. In the last decade, program reviews were being conducted in 43 states for at least some programs and 47 state higher education agencies had the authority to approve at least some new programs (Barak, 1990). However, program review and approval has always been regarded as one of the most sensitive aspects of statewide coordination, “touching the very heart of what institutions of higher education are actually doing....” (Glenny, 1971).

Through research recently completed under the aegis of the Pew Charitable Trusts, practices in academic program evaluation - including program review, student outcomes assessment, and accreditation - were studied at approximately 130 institutions across the country. The study found widespread dissatisfaction with these practices, and also reports “anecdotal evidence of widespread dissatisfaction, not only from institutions but state policymakers as well” (Wergin, 1999). A project has been proposed, involving SHEEO offices in three to five states to help the institutions develop program review policies and practices that are more efficient and more useful. Indeed, a July 1998 survey of state higher education academic officers indicated that several were considering or had already undertaken changes to their academic program policies - Illinois, Texas, Kentucky, Virginia, South Carolina, Oklahoma, Colorado, Wisconsin, and Indiana (Epperson, 1999).

**The Commission’s
legislative mandate**

In establishing the California Postsecondary Education Commission as the State’s planning and coordinating agency for postsecondary education, the Legislature and the Governor recognized the review of academic programs as one of its central functions and charged the Commission with a number of specific responsibilities in this regard. Among the Commis-

sion's mandates in the California Education Code, those related both directly and indirectly to program planning, review, and evaluation may be found in Sections 66903 and 66904, unless otherwise noted below:

- ◆ The Commission “shall review proposals by the public segments for new programs, the priorities that guide them, the degree of coordination with nearby public, independent and private postsecondary educational institutions, and shall make recommendations regarding those proposals to the Legislature and the Governor.” “All proposals for new postsecondary educational programs shall be forwarded to the commission for review” and the commission “shall review the proposals within a reasonable length of time, which time shall not exceed 60 days following submission of the program and the specified materials and documents.” Under this mandate, Commission staff must review and either concur or not concur with proposals for new schools and colleges, graduate and undergraduate degree and certificate programs, and new research institutes or centers submitted by the University of California, the California State University, and the California Community Colleges.
- ◆ Section 66010.4 gives the Commission specific approval authority (versus concurrence) for all doctoral programs proposed by the California State University in conjunction with one or more independent institutions of higher education. During the review of a proposal for a joint doctorate, Commission staff organizes a Joint Graduate Review Board of faculty with expertise in the discipline under study from campuses of the State University and independent institutions, other than those proposing the program, to advise the Commission during the decision-making process.
- ◆ The Code also directs the Commission, “in consultation with the public segments ... to establish a schedule for segmental review of selected educational programs, evaluate the program approval, review, and disestablishment processes of the segments, and report its findings and recommendations to the Legislature and the Governor.” Commission staff depends upon the well-established and regularized processes in the University of California and the California State University for the review of established programs in the four-year systems.
- ◆ In addition, the Commission is to “periodically collect or conduct studies ... of projected manpower supply and demand” to improve the information base upon which students make choices about professions and to “consider the relationship between academic education and vocational educational and job training programs.” Supply and demand studies in such diverse occupational areas as education, nursing, and library/information science have occasionally been prepared by Commission staff, generally in response to proposed legislation or campus initiatives.

- ◆ Furthermore, under the *Guidelines* governing the Commission's responsibilities in approving new campuses, the Commission is directed to consider the academic plan for that campus as part of the review. New campuses for which staff has most recently reviewed academic plans include the California State University, Monterey Bay; the University of California, Merced; and the California State University, Channel Islands.

These mandated activities, either directly or indirectly related to academic programs, are integral to the Commission's role as the planning and coordinating agency for postsecondary education in the State. Through its role in academic planning, review, and evaluation, the Commission ensures that the systems of higher education remain responsive to the State's educational and economic needs and the needs of students and maintains high quality in all programs.

Commission and segmental roles

Unlike its counterparts in many other states, the Commission operates in an advisory capacity and hence has a comparably modest role in the oversight of academic programs. It has no authority, for example, to conduct its own reviews of existing programs on individual campuses nor to discontinue programs as do other state governing agencies. The Commission staff instead focuses its attention primarily on the proposals for new programs that are submitted by the University of California and the California State University. An academic program in either of these systems is developed in essentially the same way. Frequently prompted by new developments in an intellectual field or by changing student or societal needs, faculty begin the process by proposing a new program to their department and to the appropriate deans.

Once a formal proposal is developed, it must make its way through a variety of checkpoints on the campus before it is submitted to the system-wide office - either the Office of the President in Oakland for the University of California or the Chancellor's Office in Long Beach for the California State University. Staff in both offices carry out a careful review of each proposal. As part of this review, the State University engages external reviewers in similar or related disciplines from throughout the country, while the University of California relies upon the systemwide Academic Senate to provide expertise. The review process may be attenuated if the campus is asked to reconsider certain elements and/or rewrite the proposal.

Commission staff is aware of new programs on the horizon, as both systems prepare an annual list of new programs projected over the next five years. Although these lists, including projected dates of implementation, may change, they are a helpful guide to an institution's intent.

Once a proposal arrives at the Commission for review, staff applies seven criteria that have been developed in consultation with the systems and in

existence for many years. These criteria, which represent the State's interests, include the following:

- ◆ Student demand;
- ◆ Societal needs;
- ◆ Appropriateness to institutional and segmental mission;
- ◆ The number of existing and proposed programs in the field;
- ◆ Total costs of the program;
- ◆ Maintenance and improvement of quality; and
- ◆ Advancement of knowledge.

The Commission's reviews also take into consideration enrollments, capacity of other programs, geographic distribution, adequacy of resources, job opportunities, articulation with other segments, data from professional organizations, and other indices, as appropriate. Although staff depends upon the systemwide office and faculty review on matters related to appropriateness of the curriculum and number and qualifications of the faculty, it may also examine these elements as well. Each proposal takes, on average, two and a half days to complete and generally involves several careful readings, consultations with the systems, research on the discipline, contact with professional organizations, a catalog search, analysis of enrollments and degrees conferred in existing programs in the discipline, as well as judgment and thought, before a letter concurring, not concurring, or requesting additional information is sent to the appropriate system office.

Due to a lack of resources, proposals from the California Community Colleges are not being reviewed at this time by the Commission. In 1994, when the Chancellor's Office of the California Community Colleges was experiencing a staff transition in their program review unit and submitting proposals only sporadically and not in a timely fashion, Commission management directed staff to limit its focus to the new programs proposed by the University of California and the California State University. Over the last few years, however, the Community Colleges Chancellor's Office has had a change of staff and a change of process, resulting in more timely and efficacious review of a significantly increased number of proposals. The Commission's decision not to review these proposals has continued to stand, however, because of workload issues. The Department of Finance recently approved a Budget Change Proposal from the Commission, requesting funding for an additional staff position in the area of academic program review and a search is currently in progress.

Conclusion

The Commission represents the public interest in discharging its program review responsibilities for the State. When an academic program is proposed, it is done so initially by the faculty that will be teaching it and are thus committed to it with natural self-interest. A particular discipline is the faculty's area of expertise and one that they wish to share with their students. The Commission, on the other hand, looks at other indices that

are equally important - those that have to do with the State's interests and the utilization of taxpayer funds. The activities undertaken by the Commission with respect to academic program planning, review, and evaluation are important to ensure that the academic choices provided to students not only further the life of the mind, the teaching and research interests of the faculty, and institutional vitality but also meet the State's economic needs. It is this amalgam of necessary tensions to which the Commission tends through its work in academic planning, review, and evaluation.
